

Matthew 18:21-35 “The 70x7 Formula” Rev. Janet Chapman 9/24/23

It's been a decade since I had to fill out school permission forms and I confess I've lost my touch. With Laia, my foreign exchange student, I'm learning a whole new approach to grade checks, teacher communication, and new permission forms such as the one called, “Parent Behavior Agreement.” It is a sign of the times! Parents must sign an agreement for their behavior at school functions. Don't get me wrong – I think it's about time! In fact, maybe this isn't such a bad idea for society as a whole? Can you imagine signing a behavior agreement before entering football games where things like a Dolphins fan beats up a health-compromised Patriots fan? Imagine signing a legally binding *behavior* agreement before getting behind the wheel of a car, walking down the marriage aisle, purchasing a gun, attending a public event such as Board of Supervisors, or even just entering a retail store? I get there would be administrative issues, but I wonder if overall, the expectation to behave as mature adults or be sent to behavior modification might have some benefits? So possibly the schools are onto something, but I don't think they are getting to the root of the problem. Last Sunday, the book of Romans revealed how judging others can be our downfall; today Matthew guides us to the life-giving and triumphant practice of forgiveness. Several years ago, there was a notorious news story about “Hockey Dad,” who had been sentenced to a maximum of 10 years in prison for manslaughter. Two years earlier, watching his kids in an ice hockey game, he felt the coach had allowed things to get too rough. In a fit of rage, the Hockey Dad killed the coach. During the trial, there was a period of adjournment when a close relative of the victim met Hockey Dad in the court hallway and said to him, “I forgive you.” Eyewitnesses to the act of forgiveness said the tone was genuine and there followed a moving exchange between the pardoner and the accused. But on the day of the sentencing, one of the victim's young sons read to the judge an emotional appeal for giving the Hockey Dad the longest possible time in prison. The son's appeal for punishment was as genuine as the pardoner's words of grace. The Hockey Dad received both punishment and pardon.

Jesus's command in Matthew 18 to forgive seven times seventy directly follows his elaborate directions on how to handle people who have wronged us. He has just told his followers that if people fail to repent after 3 attempts at getting them to acknowledge their

wrongdoing, then they are to be “treated like a Gentile or tax collector” (Mt. 18:17b). That hardly sounds like forgiving 70 times 7 or 77 times, it can be read either way. Likewise, take note of the severity of the punishment given to the unforgiving servant in Jesus’ parable, a purposefully shocking parable by anyone’s standards. The unforgiving servant has been forgiven an insurmountable amount by our standards like a zillion dollars, but he won’t forgive a few dollars owed to him. Thus, he is handed over “to be tortured until he can pay his entire debt” which does not begin to give forgiveness a second chance. The parable is meant to be absurd in its extremism as it addresses people who should know the source and reality of forgiveness. People like us know pardon and punishment, mercy and judgment, are entangled issues within the human heart.

Rather than settling for one or the other, Matthew affirms there is room for both in the gospel. How do you balance judgment and grace in life? When do you call someone to account for a wrong and hurtful action, and when do you decide to release it and move on? When have you erred in your own life and when have you received judgment or mercy? Was the judgment just, was the mercy healing? These are profound questions that go straight to the heart of how human communities will preserve common moral standards, while still allowing for the mistakes and distortions that are part of our human nature. Justice and mercy ride alongside us in our daily excursions prompting us, with each human encounter, to give one or the other the upper hand. Mark Feldmeier notes that Justice is that voice in your head that is always looking out for you because it’s a hard world out there, and without Justice, people will walk all over you. Mercy is that voice that teaches you how to look out for somebody other than yourself, because it’s a hard world out there, and without Mercy, you will walk all over people. The two are with us always, inseparable. I will confess that my gut seems to want Justice to have the final say while my heart advocates for Mercy. When the unsheltered person walks in and asks for money to buy some new shoes, Justice ask me if he deserves it, Mercy asks me if I deserve the shoes on my own feet? When I stand at the bedside of a woman whose body is riddled with cancer, Justice whispers in my ear, “She doesn’t deserve this, not her; Mercy whispers, “No one deserves this.” When someone takes an unfair, cruel shot at me, Justice says, “Never forget it; an eye for an eye”; Mercy says, “Turn

the other cheek; remember who you are.” When someone provokes or triggers me, Justice says, “Stand your ground”; Mercy says, “Blessed are the peacemakers.” Justice keeps an eye on my enemies; Mercy prays for them. Justice packs a piece of chalk always keeping score of rights and wrongs; Mercy keeps an eraser to wipe them all away. I wonder if you know these voices? Do they ride along with you as well and who do you allow in the front seat the most? If you are like me, these two characters rent little loft apartments in your head and throw loud parties when you lie down to go to sleep at night. You pull the covers up and think back on the events of the day – the news in the world, the people in your life – and that’s when the voices are heard. Who wronged me; who did I wrong? Who did good to me, and what do I owe them for it?

Matthew’s community, the church, you and I ask Jesus, “How many times do I have to forgive someone who does me wrong? Is 7 times a pretty fair limit on the forgiveness barometer?” And Jesus throws out this wild mathematical formula: “Not seven times, but seven times seventy times.” The formula is strange, isn’t it? At first glance, you might think the point is that if you just get to 7 or 77 or 490, you’ll begin to lose count, right? Don’t bother doing the math because it keeps getting bigger, right? Well, sort of but there is more to the formula than that, as there always is with Jesus. The reference goes back to Genesis, chapter 4 and a guy named Lamech, fifth generation to Cain’s family. You remember Cain, right? He’s the one who killed his brother Abel outside the garden of Eden and his murderous instinct was passed on from generation to generation. Lamech inherited Cain’s thirst for justice through the shedding of blood so, in chapter 4, he announces to his household, “If Cain is avenged sevenfold, then Lamech is avenged seventy-sevenfold.” In other words, there is no limit on the number of heads that will roll should anyone do him wrong. And with that statement, the formula of endless retribution and revenge is encoded in human behavior forever. Lamech practiced the third law of thermodynamics before Newton ever discovered it: For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. Every mushroom cloud, every school yard fight, every weapon of mass destruction, every domestic battering is one more factor in the endless formula of 70 times 7.

But leave it to Jesus to take that formula of 70 times 7, symbolic in its nature of ongoing, never ceasing, and Jesus draws a line underneath it, and divides it by the single factor of his own life and sacrifice, so that every time we do the math in order to arrive at Justice, it always equals Mercy, 70 times 7-fold. Jesus does the math for us so we don't have to. His mercy is his justice, and our calling as Christians is to live in the condition of that mercy and pay it forward, even if it puts us in debt according to the standards of justice in this world. Forgiveness is one of the most powerful practices of healing, not as much for the other person, as for ourselves. Erasing the score we have kept in our heads and hearts gives untold freedom back to us. It is in practicing forgiveness, as Jesus modelled, that God's mercy and God's justice take on a single name which is called Grace. Letting justice and mercy balance out under the overarching umbrella of grace is to live as Christ taught. A pastor advises her parishioner, "Forgive your cheating, stealing husband not because what he did was acceptable. It was mean and selfish. Forgive him because he doesn't deserve the power to live in your head, turning you into a bitter angry person. Get him out of your life emotionally as completely as he is out of it physically, for holding onto the resentment only hurts you." There is the former prisoner of war who asked another, "Have you forgiven your captors yet?" "I will never do that," the second answered. "Then they still have you in prison, don't they?" There was the man from 16<sup>th</sup> century Switzerland who was asked to repeat the Lord's prayer and pretended he didn't know it because if he said it, he would have to forgive the merchant who cheated him; and that was something he had no intention of doing. But you know the Lord's prayer; we pray it every Sunday with the words, "Forgive us our trespasses, (our sins) as we forgive those who trespass against us (those who sin against us)." In the midst of the hurt, pain, betrayal, anger, shame and guilt of our world, perhaps that is where we begin to practice forgiveness and thus modify our behaviors. Because Jesus knew there would be such times, he leads us in prayer as we begin today. (Pray)